
LITERATURE REVIEW

Spiritual healing: a unifying influence in complementary therapies

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SUMMARY. Spiritual healing is viewed by many as one of the more 'fringe' complementary therapies. This is related to: 1. lack of awareness of 155 controlled studies of healing which substantiate that healing is an effective intervention¹ and 2. differences between conventional reductionist medical theories and theories of subtle energy medicine.^{2,3} The holistic approach and underlying principles of spiritual healing are common denominators amongst many of the complementary therapies.²

INTRODUCTION

Spiritual healing is the intentional influence of one or more people upon one or more living systems without utilising known physical means of intervention. It is commonly practised in two major approaches: 1. with a laying-on of hands – the hands lightly touching or held near to the body, often combined with visualisations¹⁻⁴; and 2. with meditation, prayer or other focused intent, again often combined with visualisations.¹⁻⁵ Visualisations may include seeing the healee as whole and well; applications of white or coloured healing light, clearing of cloudiness within the biological energy field around the body, and the like. The two approaches are often used simultaneously. I shall use the term *healing* to mean *spiritual healing*, not to be confused with the physiological process of healing.

Out of 155 controlled studies of healing, more than half demonstrate statistically significant effects. These include studies of humans, other animals, plants, bacteria, yeasts, cells in laboratory culture, enzymes and more. Some of the studies were with touch healing, some with hands held near the treated organisms, and some were done from distances of several metres to several miles.¹

There can be little doubt that healing is a clinically potent intervention in a variety of living organisms and laboratory systems. Let us examine one of the controlled studies in humans. Randolph Byrd MD, arranged for prayer healing to be sent to 192 patients on a coronary care unit, while another 201 patients served as controls. This was done with a double-blind design, where neither the patients nor the treating or evaluating physicians knew which patients were sent the healing and which were not. The patients were randomly assigned to either of these groups, and no significant differences were noted between the groups on many variables. Highly significant effects were

found in the treated group, with lower incidences of intubation/ventilation ($p < 0.002$), use of antibiotics ($p < 0.005$), cardiopulmonary arrest ($p < 0.02$), congestive heart failure ($p < 0.03$), pneumonia ($p < 0.03$), and the use of diuretics ($p < 0.05$). The study was published in the respected conventional *Southern Medical Journal* in 1988.⁶

On the basis of this evidence from the many significant studies, and in the absence of any known negative side-effects, I believe that if healing were a medicine it would be on the market.

IS THERE A THEORY TO EXPLAIN HEALING?

As there is strong evidence that in distant healing one person may influence another person^{7,8} or other organisms⁹⁻¹¹ without known physical energies, and even from a great distance with no apparent diminution in effect, we have to amend the conventional, Newtonian theories and views about the world. Albert Einstein pointed out, early in this century, that matter and energy are interchangeable. Quantum physics has amply confirmed his theory.

Conventional, Newtonian medicine continues to address the body primarily as matter. Healers have been saying for a long time that they are addressing the *subtle energy body* when they do healings.

Healers report that several layers of subtle energy fields surround and interpenetrate the physical body.^{3,12-14} They claim that the physical body is an expression of the states of these energy fields, each of which is distinctly related to an aspect of being (physical, emotional, mental and spiritual). The fields are said to be hierarchically organised, successive fields being ever more subtle than the preceding ones. The emotional, mental and spiritual fields can also influence the physical body.

These subtle energy fields extend to various distances from the physical body. Though only a few

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sensitive people are able to perceive these subtle energies as visual halos or auras of colour around the bodies of living organisms and inanimate objects, many people can sense them with their hands. One has only to hold one's hands near each other and then move them slowly apart and back together to sense these, usually as heat, tingling, vibration, or subtle pressure, as when two weak magnets come together. About 90% of doctors and nurses I have instructed in workshops on Therapeutic Touch and Spiritual Healing are able to perceive these, and 25–75% of general audiences can do so as well. (The lower percentages are among academics and others who have difficulties in letting go of *thinking about what they are doing* in order simply to *do it* or *be with it* and let their bodies experience these energies).

The human body is a very sensitive instrument for perceiving subtle energies. This presents problems of 'noise' in interpreting human reports. There is also wide variability in healers' subjective experiences of perceiving and directing energies.^{1,15} Most people who are gifted with healing are not academically or research-oriented and have difficulty translating subtle energy perceptions into language comprehensible and acceptable to conventional scientists. These problems have contributed to the difficulties of science in accepting reports of healers.¹⁶

Healing is an individual and subjective phenomenon. It is from the realms of experience we label *noetic* or *ineffable*.¹⁷ This means that we can know aspects of healing through inner awarenesses which are clearly perceptible but difficult to describe in words. This is especially true in Western society, where our language is heavily biased towards the material aspects of experience. From that vantage point, we are led to believe that whatever is not perceivable by the outer senses or measurable with mechanical, electromagnetic or particle physics instruments is considered, pejoratively, 'non'sense' or 'im'material' – rather than accepted as representing a different class of phenomena for which the measuring instruments of the reductionist, material world are inappropriate.^{3,5} For these reasons, one must consider the observations of multiple healer researchers in order to arrive at a rough consensus of what healing might be.^{3,18}

It would appear that energy medicine and allopathic approaches simply represent the two sides of Einstein's equation, $E=mc^2$. We are just beginning to appreciate how laws of subtle energies differ from the laws of Newtonian physiology, much as the laws of modern physics differ from Newtonian physics.

Sadly, the prevailing reductionistic belief systems in Western society view spiritual healing as an alien belief system, and until recently, have rejected the methods and practitioners of healing. In part, this is a mirror of the view, promulgated by some religious groups, that healing should be done exclusively within their jurisdiction and only by their members. Such groups may even employ fear tactics to enforce their

views, such as claiming that healing outside their jurisdictions may be the work of the devil. When viewed in the context of practices of healing which are found in every single culture around the world, this is clearly a minority view; more on this shortly.

SUBTLE ENERGY PROCESSES ARE COMMON DENOMINATORS AMONGST MANY COMPLEMENTARY THERAPIES

Homoeopathy postulates that there is an informational or energetic patterning imprinted in the diluent used to convey the homoeopathic remedy. Without such an explanation, it is difficult to understand how a solution could still be potent when it is so dilute that there can be no single molecule of the original remedy left in it.^{3, 19–21} Although homoeopaths usually do not pursue this reasoning to the next step, to hypothesize that the energy patterning in the remedy influences the *subtle energy body* of the patient, this would appear to be a logical conclusion if one accepts the original homoeopathic hypothesis of the remedy as an energy pattern.

Healers have demonstrated that water to which they have directed healing will accelerate the growth of plants.^{22–24} It would appear that the water may convey a healing energy or informational pattern. Water left in a church during prayers has similarly been shown to influence the growth of plants, but only during certain phases of the moon.²⁵ Healers have also demonstrated that cotton wool can convey healing.^{4,22} Treated cotton wool placed in cages of mice on iodine-deficient diets slowed the development of goitres.²²

Acupuncture describes lines of energy (meridians) running through the body, each associated with particular organs. Stimulation of specific points along these lines can release blocks to energy flows, slow down excess flows, or facilitate flows which are sluggish.^{26, 27}

Healers often identify parts of the energy body in which they feel the flows of energies are blocked. Either through touching particular points, through the projection of energies or through the withdrawal of energies, they may redress the energy imbalances.⁴

Seven major *chakras* (energy centres along the midline of the body) are commonly identified by healers as vital to the adaptation of subtle energies to the physical body.^{12,13,28,29} Chakras ('wheels' in Sanskrit) were described in Vedic writings many hundreds of years ago. Those who perceive the aura visually describe the chakras as wheels of colour when seen from the front or back, or as cones of energy originating near the spine when seen from the side.^{12,13}

Derivatives of acupuncture theory, including reflexology,³⁰ applied kinesiology,³¹ and the like employ touch and pressure as methods of stimulating the flows in the meridians. Polarity therapy³² and related

forms of touch healing involve applications of pressure at particular points to balance body energies.

Craniosacral osteopathy identifies pulsations of energies – particularly around the head, spine and sacrum, but also along the entire body.^{33, 34} Osteopaths postulate that the pulsations are due to flows of cerebrospinal fluid within the skull, transmitted via the bones of the skull to the hands of the osteopath. Pulsations may be sensed even at the extremities. It is postulated that the latter are mechanically transmitted from the central nervous system through the fascia (connective tissues). Craniosacral osteopathic treatments involve very light touch, combined with visualisations that the cranial bones are moving beneath the fingers. When abnormal pulsations are sensed, therapists may hold their hands still at the sides of the head while visualising that they are stopping the pulsation and holding it from beating for a few moments. Upon release of the therapeutic focus, the pulsation will often resume a normal beat. Such craniosacral manipulations are often more *visualisations* than *mechanical influences* of the fingers upon the bones of the skull.³⁵

It is a puzzle to me why healers do not report the pulsations identified by craniosacral osteopaths. I can only guess that the visualisations of the cranial bones attune the osteopaths to physical and/or energy pulsations in the head.

Alexander teachers may extend their awareness from postural aspects of the physical body to include aspects of healing, which they commonly term 'direction'. Direction is the intent of the teacher to allow the life force within the teacher to be available to the life force within the student. 'Direction is best grounded by being still and doing nothing, letting the hands sense what might come through intuitively to the teacher and letting the hands rest lightly on the student's body at whatever locations they are guided to intuitively... No physical manipulation is used, simply guided movement... During lessons the hands of the teacher may become very hot or vibrate and students often experience releases of emotions during the lessons.'³⁶

Bioenergetic therapy involves positioning patients in various postures which influence their awareness of tensions within the body and facilitate releases of emotions and alterations of character armouring which have become locked into the body.³⁷ John Pierrakos is an American physician who teaches core energetic therapy, a variant of this approach.³⁸ He sees pulsations in the aura (biological energy field) around the body, and these change as a result of core energetic therapy.

It would be fascinating to have comparisons of Pierrakos' biological energy field pulsations with those of craniosacral osteopaths.

Rolfing, a deep and firm massage, may release emotional tensions which have become locked in the muscles, tendons and joints. Valerie Hunt is an electrophysiologist who has worked with conventional

electromyograms, electrocardiograms and electroencephalograms. She had Rosalind Bruyere, a healer who is able to see auras, observe the rolfing treatments of numbers of patients. Bruyere was able to identify when emotional tensions were released through her observations of the aura.^{2, 39}

The early hypnotists used 'magnetic passes' to induce very deep levels of trance – rarely achieved through modern techniques. While in these states, subjects often could diagnose their own illnesses and demonstrated telepathic abilities. Telepathic inductions from a distance were repeatedly demonstrated. Many of these phenomena are similar to experiences reported under distant healing.⁴⁰ *Electroencephalographic evidence* of entrainment of brainwaves of healers and healees suggests that there may be a resonance between healers and healees during healings.⁴¹

Biofeedback may lead to spiritual awarenesses which are very similar to those reported by healers and healees.^{42, 43}

It would appear that there are numerous elements of subtle energy nature in common amongst a range of complementary therapies.

WHY IS IT SO HARD FOR CONVENTIONAL MEDICINE AND SCIENCE TO ACCEPT HEALING AS A VALID AND POTENT TREATMENT?

Action through intent, which may be effective even from great distances, is considered strange within conventional understandings of the world. Therefore the evidence on healing is generally ignored or rejected. It is easier to do this than to reassess our basic beliefs about the world.^{3, 16, 44} The avoidance of new theories and evidence contradicting conventional beliefs is perpetuated through peer censure amongst scientists and through restrictive publication policies in conventional professional journals.^{45, 46}

In quantum physics, it has been shown that non-local effects may occur. An electron may be understood both as a particle and as a wave function. The universe is so intricately interwoven that every element in it is ultimately influenced by every other element. In other words, the observer cannot be separated from the system which is being observed. Much has been made of the similarities between modern physics and mystical phenomena in excellent books so I shall not belabour these.^{47, 48}

It took several decades of research before these observations, which run counter to our ordinary experiences of the world, were accepted. A similar, slow process of acceptance is apparent in assimilating spiritual healing methods and theories.

There may be greater difficulty with the acceptance of healing, however, as this involves a shift in world views with far more personal consequences than the

abstract and highly theoretical shifts with quantum physics. Many people find it threatening to learn that another person might influence them through thoughts or intentions. Rather than examine and deal with their discomforts, they reject the threatening concepts and distance themselves from those who propose them. This is analogous to the ancient custom of killing the messenger who bears bad news. People who advocate a belief in healing may be discredited and may suffer various discriminations against them. This is a serious hindrance to the funding and conduct of research in subtle energy medicine and publication of papers in this field.

England is a world leader in integrating spiritual healing with conventional medicine. In the mid-1970s, British healers formed a healing organisation which lobbied to allow healers to treat patients in National Health Service hospitals. With one *governmental* (not medical) decision, 1500 hospitals were opened to healers.

In the early 1980s, the major healing organisations joined in a Confederation which standardised a code of conduct. The code of conduct was approved by the Royal Colleges of Medicine, Surgery, Nursing and Midwifery. Members of the Confederation offer healing as a *complement* to conventional medical care.

THE DOCTOR-HEALER NETWORK

This network has provided a forum since 1988 for doctors, nurses and other conventional health care professionals to meet with healers, other complementary therapists, and clergy to explore how spiritual healing can be integrated with conventional medical care.

General practitioners refer patients regularly to healers and some have healers working in their surgeries. A few of the healers are paid under the NHS. Doctors can obtain Postgraduate Education Allowance credits for learning to develop their healing gifts. Two hospital pain centres, three hospital cancer centres, a rheumatology ward and a cardiac rehabilitation centre have healers working in them regularly. The *Doctor-Healer Network Newsletter* shares the experiences of healers and doctors between DHN groups and with interested subscribers around the world. Evidence is accumulating that healing is cost-effective.⁴⁹

CONCLUSION

Spiritual healing brings about a harmonisation of body, emotions, mind, community and spirit. Healing is about treating the person who has the disease, not merely about addressing the disease the person has. This is a conceptual and methodological common denominator amongst many of the complementary

therapies – when they are applied in the context of their theoretical bases and not merely as methodological techniques.

Spiritual healing brings about the easing of symptoms, the removal of blocks in energetic flows, the retrieval of repressed memories of emotional hurts, improvements in many illnesses, improvements in relationships and an opening into spiritual awareness. All of these may be achieved with no more than the laying-on of hands or the projection of healing from a distance. In essence, spiritual healing is a holistic therapy.

In my own practice of psychotherapy combined with spiritual healing, I find that the healing facilitates the retrieval of emotional traumas underlying physical and emotional problems. Conversely, psychotherapy helps people to digest and process the emotional traumas uncovered and released through healing. My personal belief is that this combination of cognitive, energetic and spiritual elements offers a more thorough 'house-cleaning', but there are others who feel that the healing alone is sufficient or even that the processing of emotional materials is a waste of time or a resistance to the true aims of spiritual healing, i.e. the opening of oneself to spiritual awareness.

In conclusion, it would appear that the theories and practices of spiritual healing may offer a unifying theory and a unifying influence in the field of complementary therapies.

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